

Lost in Design: The Absence (Mostly) of Cultural Heritage in Puerto Rican Fashion Design.

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This paper is part of a larger project on Puerto Rican costume, dress, and fashion. The text presented here is the full version of the paper; during the presentation at the Second International Non-Western Fashion Conference we will only read the last two sections of the paper.

Abstract

Some of our past research has explored Puerto Rican dress and fashion through fieldwork, examination of primary sources and content analysis. We have published on the Masks Festival of Hatillo, a Christmas carnival in Puerto Rico where costumes are constructed by covering garments with ruffled pieces of fabric, creating intricate and colorful designs. We have also studied the Puerto Rican jíbaro or mountain peasant—one of the most significant images of Puerto Rican cultural identity—examining a variety of transformations of the romantic image of jíbaro dress (wide-brimmed straw hat, loose cotton shirt and pants and sandals or bare feet) as it navigates through time in new geographical and cultural settings. Dress associated with the female jíbaro (a peasant blouse with a low neckline and a full skirt with a headscarf, sash and large earrings) has also been appropriated in a variety of simulacra including a Barbie doll. With this rich cultural heritage in tow we assumed that Puerto Rican fashion designers would take advantage and reference elements from dress associated to some of the traditions and popular culture aspects mentioned above. We have found, however, that the incorporation of national heritage and tradition is scarce among Puerto Rican fashion designers and left almost exclusively in the hands of manufacturers of souvenirs who also occasionally incorporate other elements of Puerto Rican cultural heritage such as native Taino imagery, hand-made lace or mundillo, and dress from folkloric dances such as the Bomba and the Plena. It seems that in Puerto Rico—and we venture to say that also in most of Latin America—connecting once brand as a designer with recognized symbols of national culture is not a common practice. We believe that this is in part due to the commodification of said national and traditional symbols in the souvenir market. There are also strong reactions coming from the “traditionalists” when designers venture to modify an element of something considered cultural heritage and use it as a source of inspiration for their collections. This attitude limits the exploration in Puerto Rico, and perhaps most of Latin America, of cultural heritage as a source for design inspiration or branding.

Keywords: cultural heritage; fashion design; modernity; traditional; Puerto Rico

Introduction

Puerto Rico has a rich cultural heritage that can be traced back to the native Taínos and to a number of traditions inherited from Spain during the years the island was a colony of the European country. Puerto Rico was occupied by the United States in 1898 and, thus, the island has never been an independent country. The condition of perennial colony has turned cultural heritage into precious cargo for those defending a national identity that can be distinctive from

mainstream America. Adding to the cultural landscape of the country are a number of Afro-Caribbean traditions, including some associated to carnival as well as a diverse number of local crafts kept alive by artisans. With such rich cultural heritage in tow we assumed that Puerto Rican fashion designers would take advantage and reference elements from dress associated to some of the traditions and popular culture aspects mentioned above. We have found, however, that the incorporation of national and cultural heritage is scarce among Puerto Rican fashion designers and left almost exclusively in the hands of manufacturers of souvenirs who also occasionally incorporate other elements of Puerto Rican cultural heritage such as native Taíno imagery, hand-made lace or *mundillo*, and dress from folkloric dances such as the Bomba and the Plena. It seems that in Puerto Rico—and we venture to say that also in most of Latin America—connecting one's brand as a designer with recognized symbols of national culture or heritage is not a common practice.

Puerto Rican Cultural Heritage

Some of our past research has explored Puerto Rican dress and fashion through fieldwork, examination of primary sources and content analysis. We have published on the “Máscaras de Hatillo”, a Christmas carnival in Puerto Rico where costumes are constructed by covering garments with ruffled pieces of fabric, creating intricate and colorful designs. The festival is held every December in Puerto Rico and costume has become the main element of visual communication for over a thousand individuals who participate dressed in matching costumes and organized in groups. We traced the change from the undecorated costumes and masks worn originally to the adding of *rizos* (flounces) sewn to the garments in the 1950s and the complex designs seen in the outfits after the 1980s. Other festivals in the island incorporate elaborate costumes and masks. The Fiestas de Santiago Apóstol or Saint James Festival is celebrated every year during the month of July in Loiza, a coastal town in northeastern Puerto Rico with a predominantly black population. The most prominent feature of the festival are the *vegigantes*, grotesque revelers wearing colorful African inspired masks made out of coconut shells with horns protruding from various places. The remainder of the costume, an overall-type of garment, is made out of bright solid or printed fabric with wide sleeves and legs which, when extended, resemble a flying demon or bat. A variation of the same festival, coinciding with Mardi Gras, occurs in the southern city of Ponce where *vegigante* masks are constructed with a celebrated papier maché technique. *Vegigante* figures and masks of various sizes are available all over the island as souvenirs for tourists or as collectable decorations for Puerto Rican families. These festivals show a syncretism of European carnival and Africa traditions. African inheritance in Puerto Rican culture is strong in other aspects as Ramón López (2004) indicates: “The African heritage in our crafts is not limited to those objects recognized for their blackness but it also extends to the way forms, colors, and messages are organized in rhythms that are recognized by all Puerto Ricans” (20).

We have also studied the Puerto Rican *jíbaro* or mountain peasant—one of the most significant images of Puerto Rican cultural identity—examining a variety of transformations of the romantic image of *jíbaro* dress as it navigates through time in new geographical and cultural settings: the mountain, the Puerto Rican city, and New York. The *jíbaros*' attire has endured transformations, answering to these roles in new geographic and cultural settings. As it is often the case, however, a certain romantic and stereotypical image of *jíbaro* dress has been frozen in time. The replication of the *jíbaro* relays heavily on the clothing, which has retained several elements throughout time such as the wide-brimmed straw hat, loose cotton shirt and pants, and sandals or bare feet. Dress associated with the female *jíbaro* (a peasant blouse with a low neckline and a full skirt with a headscarf, sash and large earrings) has also been appropriated in a variety of simulacra including a Barbie doll. Discussing the *jíbaro* López (2004) indicates that: “the artisanal theme of the *jibaro* is the expression of the craft of poverty. Ingenuity goes hand-in-hand with lack of resources” (22). A tradition of hand-made crafts is also evident in a variety of products including the art of *mundillo* or bobbin lace, wood carved *Reyes Magos* or three wise

men, leather goods, objects made from gourds, jewelry made from coconut shells (earrings, necklaces, hair clips, etc.), and coastal crafts based on leaves from palm trees, shells, conch, coral, or sea turtle shells. According to López most of these practices developed in the 19th century as a source of income for Puerto Ricans with low resources and were further developed to accommodate the taste of wealthy Puerto Ricans who became target customers.

Also relevant are forms of dress from folkloric dances such as the *bomba* and the *plena*. The name *bomba* derives from the main musical instrument, the *bomba* drums. Originally women wore underskirts or *enaguas* given to them by the *hacendados* (landowners), which they painstakingly decorated with jumbie-beads (*Adenantha pavonina*) and glass shards. These embellishments were believed to provide protection against *mal de ojo* (evil eye) and evil spirits. Blouses were fitted with band collars and long sleeves that served as protection from the sun and dancers covered their head with *pañuelos* (kerchiefs). Men wore suits made out of white linen obtained from rice or flour sacks. Shirts did not have buttons, as they were rather expensive or inaccessible; instead men used a *lazo* or ribbon to tie the shirt's neck. Pants were held in place with rope or with leftover fabric. Men also sported Panama hats or simple straw hats known as *pavas*. Another autochthonous Puerto Rican dance is *plena* which appeared around 1916 in the Southern coastal towns of Puerto Rico—particularly Ponce—where it was performed at parties and street protests. Dresses were one-piece with lowered waistlines and knee-length A-line skirts slimmer than those used for *bomba*. The skirts were shorter and lighter with considerably less fabric. Traditional large prints and dark colors probably arose from the need to use window curtains to sew the dresses during times of economic hardship. Blouses were flounced but traditionally they were not worn off the shoulder, in the manner later used by most folkloric groups. Men wore cotton or linen wide-legged pants in dark and khaki shades. Pants were held by suspenders. Men also wore bright-colored or striped vests as well as bow ties and straw hats. Other national symbols that may appear in the tourist market include those inspired by the natural landscape of the island such as the flor de maga (*Thespesia grandiflora*), the pitirre bird (*Tyrannus dominicensis*), the cotorra puertorriqueña (*Amazona vittata*), and the flamboyant (*Delonix regia*) and ceiba (*Ceiba pentandra*) trees. Among the most popular images featured on souvenirs is the coquí frog (*Eleutherodactylus coqui*), only found in Puerto Rico and considered by many a quintessential symbol for the island.

Fashion Design in Puerto Rico

According to Delma S. Arrigoitia there are three milestones in the history of Puerto Rican fashion in its development from a domestic industry to high-end fashion. One is the appearance in the late 1950s of Luisa Matienzo and her atelier which evolves from a home operation to a full professional atelier followed by the work of Pedro Zorilla in the 1960s, the first important male fashion designer in the country and also a leader among Puerto Rican fashion professionals. The Asociación Puertorriqueña de la Moda (Puerto Rican Fashion Association) is created in 1959 but strengthened by Zorilla's impact. The 1960s also marks the important arrival of other Cuban designers immigrating to Puerto Rico including Luis Fuentes, David Fernández, Mojena, Manet, Carmen Chirino, and Fernando Pena. Arrigoitia finally cites Carlota Alfaro not only for her contribution as a designer in the late 1960s and during the 1970s but also for her contribution as a fashion educator in the 1980s. In the first period of glory for Puerto Rican fashion during the 1950s and 1960s designers organized fashion shows at a number of hotels in San Juan and, according to Arrigoitia, themes were related to cultural heritage (Amapola, El Cacique) or geographic landmarks (Yunque, Luquillo, Parguera).

The Carnaval de Puerto Rico “Juan Ponce de León” offered a platform for designers to experiment with fantasy costumes worn by partygoers. Related to European carnival traditions (Mardi Gras), the party took place the week before the beginning of Lent and before the period of fasting and general abstinence in the Christian calendar. The carnival in San Juan was for many years—starting in 903—a picturesque event that allowed designers such as Celeste Benitez de Abreu, Luisa Matienzo, and Patria Moreno de Robles to create lavish masquerade

fantasy costumes with expensive textiles and a plethora of embellishments including sequins, encrusted jewels, and fine embroidery. The carnival stimulated fashion and generated work for designers and high-end seamstresses. Themes for carnival costumes, however, were hardly ever related to Puerto Rican culture or history and derived mostly from global geography, history, and literature. Characters making appearances in the annals of the event include Ofelia from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Beatriz from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and Marguerite from Dumas' *The Lady of the Camellias*. Fantasy dresses inspired by Asian countries—particularly in the South East—perceived as “exotic” were also common.

Currently, Puerto Rico has an active fashion scene including a number of fashion events such as Puerto Rico High Fashion Week, San Juan Moda, South Fashion Week, and West Fashion Week. Puerto Rico High Fashion Week was founded in 2005 by the recognized model Caridad Fernández who is also president of ÚNICA Model Agency. The event is the largest and most established for the local fashion industry and it is subdivided in segments showcasing emerging designers, leading local designers, and international special guest designers. The event remains successful with three days of fashion shows every season. West Fashion Week was created in 2008 with the goal of showcasing designers from the area and bringing guest designers from other parts of the island. The event has been held in a variety of cities including Mayaguez, Aguadilla, and Rincón. San Juan Moda was launched in 2013 to showcase Puerto Rican fashion and accessory designers as well as a program of social events including showroom displays. A number of Puerto Rican designers participate in the above mentioned fashion shows and other showcases. Several designers have their own atelier or boutique open to the general public. Local designers include Nono Maldonado, Lisa Thon, Harry Robles, Stella Nolasco, Lisa Capalli, Vilma Martinez, Jaer Cabán, Juan Colón, Andres Gonzalez, Carlos Alberto, David Antonio, Ruben Dario, Luis Antonio, Mili Arango, Sonia Santiago, Eclíptica, Pedro Angel Chalusant, and Gabriel Ocasio for ProductoLocal.

Another important showcase for Puerto Rican fashion designers is the opportunity to have their creations selected or commissioned for local and international beauty pageants. Designers showcase their fashion talent by creating pieces for the evening gown competition or exploring wearable art by way of fantasy costumes for the national dress competition. For the Miss Universe 2013 national dress competition pageant Jaer Cabán—an up-and-coming designer—created a look reminiscent of coral reefs, while Harry Robles—an established Puerto Rican designer—created the evening gown for the event. For the Miss Universe pageant in 2000 Carlota Alfaro, another important Puerto Rican designer, designed the national costume worn by Zoribel Fonalledas. The gown was inspired by the national flower, flor de maga. Many Puerto Rican fashion designers careers have been launched or cemented thanks in no small part to the Miss Universe competition. Oftentimes, a candidate's success or failure is attributed to the gown and not the contestant.

Crafts, Souvenirs, and Cultural Heritage

Puerto Ricans have always been connected to their material culture and for years specialized stores and stands have thrived selling local crafts. Several towns host craft fairs where a variety of products ranging from wood carvings to christening gowns featuring local mundillo lace are sold. Craft fairs are considered a form of family entertainment and the most famous one was the Feria de Artesanías Bacardí at the rum distiller's factory, which was canceled in 2009 after more than 30 years. Some towns—with the support of the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña—organize topical craft fairs celebrating local products. Some examples are the *Festival del Tejido* (Embroidery Festival) in Isabela, the *Festival del Mundillo* (Bobbin Lace Festival) in Moca, the *Festival de la Hamaca* (Hammock Festival) in San Sebastián, and the Feria Nacional de Artesanía (National Crafts Fair) in Barranquitas. Craft and souvenir stands targeting the local market still exist in some town centers and even at shopping and outlet malls.

Only a few garments sold to tourists are presented as authentic versions of Puerto Rican clothing; particularly straw hats and in a few cases skirts and tops inspired by bomba and plena costumes. Stores also sell christening gowns with authentic mundillo and other handmade lace pieces. *Guayabera* shirts for men are sold in souvenir stores to tourists. The guayabera is actually one of the most important symbols of Cuban cultural heritage, but it has also been adopted as a unifying cultural symbol for Caribbean immigrants in the United States and other parts of the world, thus, guayaberas—although not authentic Puerto Rican—are perceived by tourists as an example of local material culture.

Souvenir and clothing pieces produced for the tourist market usually—as anywhere else in the world—embrace and appropriate cultural heritage more boldly but also in simplified versions. Ramón López (2003) indicates that Puerto Rican dances are loaded with religious and ceremonial complexities as well as emotional expressions that cannot be understood outside of their context. Thus, simplified version of the local dances and other cultural products originally loaded with meaning are presented to tourists for consumption in the simplest possible way. López argues that the culture of tourism requires a filtering that turns the depth of real life in Puerto Rico into a lightweight version that creates an illusion of exoticism for tourists. Another example of this are the Santería pieces available on tourists stores without major explanation of the religious meaning and magical connections said pieces have. Some genuine artifacts or “*artesanías*” are sold to tourists, particularly those celebrating native cultures including the Taino and jíbaro, as well as miniature *vegigantes* masks, wood carvings, lace pieces, and serigraphs. A great majority of the objects sold to tourists, however, simplify Puerto Rican cultural heritage and even local popular culture. This aligns with the tourist desire to consume what they perceive as local, ethnic, or authentic. Margaret Maynard (2004) explains that: “Ethnic tourism is a way of marketing acceptable forms of traditional commodity, but with a new cast appropriate for modern consumers. This preserves the credible illusion of ‘authenticity’ whilst at the same time presenting buyers with commodities that suit their contemporary tastes” (84). Regina Root (2005) discusses how rapid modernization, tourism, and globalization have significantly altered the ways in which artisans create and market “ethnic” dress. She adds: “When indigenous garments are sold to the tourist who seeks an authentic version of the ‘native costume,’ a process that anthropologists often analyze as the consumption of ethnicity, these artifacts are severed from their ceremonial origins as they enter into a secular worlds consisting of market-driven forces and, at times, contradictory political economies” (5). Tourists want to buy “the country” and “the authentic” so souvenir and craft makers begin to create artifacts that, at least, look authentic or resemble elements of what can be perceived as authentic. Case in point is the aforementioned *coquí*, a common figure in the Puerto Rican souvenir market. The *coquí* is brown in color, but most figurines and printed materials—t-shirts, towels, and posters—directed at the tourist market are made in China and display a green frog. Tourists may never become aware of the fact that the *coquí* is brown and not green.

Tradition and Modernity in Puerto Rican Fashion Design

Puerto Rican cultural heritage appears sparsely in pieces designed for carnival and a little more often on designs for beauty pageants. For instance, Rafael Mojena designed a dress for carnival inspired by the flamboyán tree—a tropical ornamental tree abundant in the island. In the 1980s Angel López created a number of national costumes for beauty pageants, including one inspired by the *cotorra puertorriqueña*. In 2011 the Puerto Rican contestant at the Miss Universe pageant wore a dress inspired by costumes worn at the *vegigantes* festival in Ponce. The dress was a creation by Puerto Rican fashion designer Jaer Cabán. The incorporation of cultural heritage elements in high-end fashion design is more sporadic. Several designers in the twentieth century used lace into their work. Evidently lace is not exclusively a Puerto Rican craft, but the tradition of handmade bobbin lace or mundillo is so ingrained in the country that the work may be perceived as reflecting a local tradition. Designers who have used lace include Carmen Chirino—who sold in stores including Henri Bendel, Neiman Marcus, and Saks Fifth

Avenue—and Mili Arango, who showed in New York in the early 1980s. The work of Arango, however, may merely reflect a “romantic” feel for lace that enjoyed popularity in the 1980s. José Martín designed a wedding dress loosely inspired by Jíbaro costume in the 1970s but further examples are hard to find. Part of the issue may be the labeling of cultural heritage as “traditional.”

Although we find the terms ‘modern,’ ‘traditional,’ ‘western,’ and ‘non-western’ limiting and problematic (Eicher et al, 2000) we use them in our discussion to present a dichotomy of cultural creation. This dichotomy is not meant to be interpreted as fixed, static, or unchangeable. We believe that material culture in Puerto Rico, as in the rest of Latin America, functions in a continuum that ranges between the modern and the traditional, the urban and the rural, the western and the non-western. Harry Redner (2004) describes this dichotomy in terms of the new and the old and explains: “When it is old it is a tradition, when it is new it is either a fashion or an innovation that is more or less revolutionary. All of this—traditions, fashions, and innovations—are continually reacting on each other to produce orderly change when the culture is sound. Thus fashions and innovations are conditioned by existing traditions, but these in turn are recreated in keeping with the new developments. This happens at all levels of culture, but to varying degrees; in general, folk culture is more bound to tradition, popular culture to fashions, and elite culture to creative innovation” (194). Latin America was always an amalgam of cultures, what Nestor García Canclini (1989) calls hybrid cultures. A never-ending mix of races and cultures made Latin America postmodern perhaps since the time of the European invasion in the fifteenth century. Latin America has often walked the line between a defense for what is considered local and customary or even autochthonous and essentially national to a desire to embrace symbols of modernity and globalism. The indigenous is appreciated and preserved, but the desire to adopt international ideas and practices—particularly if they are perceived as modern—is usually a leitmotiv. Arguing for an approach to the terms modern and traditional that can leave room for change, Andrea K. Molnar (1998) indicates that: “Local traditions are dynamic systems and have always accommodated changes by incorporating and localizing cultural elements adopted from other (or) neighboring groups” (41). Martha C. Sims and Martine Stephens (2005) believe that tradition is a constant process of cultural interpretation and reconstruction that can also be a socially and politically empowering activity.

We believe that the widespread interpretation of the term traditional as implying unchanging and static forms of dress or culture plays a part in keeping some Puerto Rican designers from exploring cultural heritage in their work. Thinking of cultural heritage as static gives an unnecessary weight to elements of material culture that could otherwise be used as positive baggage for design inspiration. Hector Omar, one of the designers we interviewed, expressed an apprehension of seeing his work classified as “folkloric.” He explained: “I have used [cultural] elements, but indirectly. I am not embarrassed of my cultural heritage, but I also do not want it to be a literal component, because it can turn your piece into a folkloric dress.” Gabriela Isabel, a recent graduate from Lisa Thon School of Design adds: “It is not that I oppose to using elements of Puerto Rican cultural heritage as much as I have not stumbled upon the opportunity. As a designer you should know how to use cultural references for inspiration without creating a folkloric costume.” An initial look at the Spring/Summer 2014 Puerto Rican fashion collections reveals an attraction towards the “exotic”—not unlike that of designers from previous generations described earlier in the paper. Designers Jesuan Ramos Román and Belmari Sifonte presented a collection inspired by African and Egyptian jewelry for their line Punky, while Hector Omar chose mermaids as his inspiration for his collection Lorelei. Only a couple of designers made reference to Puerto Rican cultural heritage. Emmanuel Acosta created a collection titled Maga Fleur inspired by the flor de maga (the national flower), while Gabriel Ocasio used images of poet Julia de Burgos in the collection for his brand ProductoLocal.

Another issue is the consideration of what the Puerto Rican fashion client is looking for. Gabriela Isabel explained that very often clients come to her atelier with preconceived ideas of the garment they want, often with pictures of already existing designs from the United States and Europe. It seems that, unlike tourists, Puerto Rican consumers are not looking for “authentic” when it comes to clothing, but rather a more “western” or occasionally “exotic” look. Gabriel Ocasio explained in relation to his collection inspired by Julia de Burgos: “Since I revealed the theme for my collection the public showed a lot of curiosity about what was going to be the final product. To the surprise of many, the collection was not as romantic as it could have been [...] on the contrary; they found a ‘fun’ collection in terms of color and design, rescuing elements from urban art.” The designer goes on to say that his collection was a commercial success.

Fabricio Forastelli (2005) indicates that the Latin American Fashion Council based in Miami along with Carolina Herrera and Oscar de la Renta have made the claim that Latin American designers need to move away from exotic and native fabrics that—although colorful—seem dated and instead engage in the modernization of fashion in Latin America. In such claim it is clear that modernization is equated to global practices in fashion and that some do not see the possibility of Latin American fashion evolving into modernity from its own roots. The implication that looking into one’s own cultural background and using local fabrics means a detachment from modernity and global fashion is not only wrong but plainly antiquated as many designers have looked into their own (and others) cultural background to create admired fashion collections. The idea of labeling Latin American cultural heritage as exotic when incorporated into fashion design is also erroneous and dangerous as it presents several implications. One, that fashion never trades on the exotic as innovation—Paul Poiret’s Orientalism at the start of the twentieth century is a solid example. Two, that it is acceptable for European and American designers to look at Latin American (and other) cultures as exotic and incorporate ideas steaming from said culture into their work, but that it is not acceptable for Latin American designers to do the same with our own heritage. Finally, it ignores successful work from current Latin American fashion designers who are looking at their own cultural roots to create innovative and—let’s use the word for sake of argument—modern fashion designs. Mexican fashion designer Armando Mafud has created collections inspired by Mexican popular tradition and cultural identity, while a similar approach was taken by Colombian designers including Hernán Zajar and Amelia Toro who actually integrates in her designs the work of indigenous groups and urban artisans.

Margaret Maynard (2004) argues that “Western high fashion has demonstrated for centuries an unceasing appetite for novel ideas based on the ‘primitive’ or the exotic. Designers today, like corporate raiders, source inspiration indiscriminately from distant cultures, usually with scant regard for original context” (79). Is the problem for the local designers that they cannot divorce themselves from the context of the “exotic” while that is easier for designers from afar to accomplish? It seems that the “exoticism” of Latin American cultural heritage that attracts European or American and a few Latin American designers does not have the same attraction to Puerto Rican designers. Is this because exoticism is interpreted differently and seen less as innovative or experimental fashion in the hands of a local designer, merely because they are closer to that culture than a designer from a different country or continent? Although this may be the perception, it is not always the case. Valeria Brandini (2009) discussing fashion in Brazil argues that consumer interest in fashion is often stimulated by new and singular references that—in the case of European designers—often translated into looking for inspiration in “exotic” cultures. Brandini (2009) indicates that Brazilian fashion in the new millennium has a strong ethnic appeal with theatrical tendencies and borrowing also from urban life and beach Brazilian culture. Therefore, the everyday life of Brazil as seen in local and street culture as well as cultural or ethnic heritage is an important source of inspiration for Brazilian designers including Ronaldo Fraga, Andre Lima, Alexandre Herhcovitch, and Maria Bonita. Brandini (2009) adds:

“Brazilian fashion designers are referencing the exotic, the urban, and the marginal, as sources of design innovation, and in turn they are providing a stimulus to a once dwindling clothing industry” (164).

Some new Puerto Rican designers appear to be adopting a strategy similar to their Brazilian counterparts by openly incorporating more elements of local culture—whether traditional or popular—into their fashion design work. Gabriel Ocasio explains: “My style as a designer is modern casual, inspired by different artistic manifestations outside of fashion design, such as sculpture, painting, drawing, literature, etc. All of these taking into consideration the geography and climate of Puerto Rico, where I intend to market my brand.” Expanding on this notion he adds: “The Puerto Rican audience is always thankful when one makes some type of homage to another Puerto Rican who have achieved success be it in politics, arts, sports.” For his line *ProductoLocal*, he designed a Spring/Summer 2014 collection featuring images of Julia de Burgos—arguably the most celebrated Puerto Rican poet. Ocasio screen-printed the image of Julia de Burgos, her signature, and/or fragments of her poems in many of the collection pieces. The choice of the image of Julia de Burgos—which is also the name of the collection—is of particular significance. Julia de Burgos is not only a reference to the past (she died in 1953 at the age of 39) and a tribute to a beloved poet, but it also brings a nationalistic sentiment to the collection. Besides being a celebrated poet, de Burgos was an active member of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party, a political organization that promoted independence for Puerto Rico from the United States. Yet, Julia de Burgos is not the most famous member of the aforementioned party; its president, Pedro Albizu Campos—a polarizing figure in Puerto Rican political and cultural history—makes frequent appearances in t-shirts in the form of silkscreen stencils, much like Julia de Burgos does in Ocasio’s collection. De Burgos is an interesting choice for fashion. Her poems—particularly “Rio Grande de Loiza”—are read in high schools and colleges throughout the island. Students are often asked to memorize passages from her work. Many would read the screen-printed likeness of the poet as a romantic gesture, a call to remember the past; but some will inevitably see it as political commentary. Yet another significant reference is the direct connection established by Ocasio with the important Puerto Rican traditions of the serigraph and graffiti street art. Serigraphy is a beloved art among Puerto Rican who usually amaze large collections of limited editions.

There are creative advantages for Puerto Rican—and other Latin American—fashion designers that embrace elements of their own cultural heritage by approaching local images and crafts not merely as one-dimensional, essential, or stock symbols but—in true postmodern practice—as signs with multiple and interchangeable meanings. In this way, Puerto Rican designers can produce and negotiate the meaning of their cultural heritage as they incorporate it into their work. This does not mean that fashion creations referencing cultural heritage can or will be completely disassociated from previously assigned meaning and any connotations of the “national”, the “authentic” or the “traditional;” but that pre-existing narratives associated to traditional dress can be unmasked and explored as mini-narratives that express not only the socially and culturally prescribed meaning, but a re-fashioned meaning produced by the artist. Again, Brandini (2009) argues that a similar approach has been appropriate for some Brazilian designers and adds that: “Operating under a fashion system that expresses the cultural differences between the “Old World” (Europe) and the “New World” (America), Brazilian fashion highlights the differences between the values of tradition and modernity... Latin America’s very recent history in the fashion business has given designers carte blanche to experiment and take risks with their creations, and in the process to build a legitimate Brazilian fashion industry” (165).

Conclusion

Fashion designers in Puerto Rico seem timid about using cultural heritage as a source of inspiration for their work. We believe that this is in part due to the commodification of national and traditional symbols in the souvenir market. This perception limits the exploration in Puerto

Rico of cultural heritage as a source for design inspiration or branding. Some of these traditions and iconography are treasured as part of a nationalist sentiment or defended as national identity and therefore, any tampering with them is considered unacceptable. Maynard (2004) has discussed how indigenous and other types of local dress are often adopted as indicators of national sentiment and national grassroots. She also indicates that post-colonial societies “perform their traditional culture in a kind of border zone or mutually accepted space of identity” (60). Not so much for themselves but on behalf of tourists where national style is deployed for commercial benefits not just by souvenir merchandisers but even by governments themselves as they “see advantage in linking nationalist iconography with commodities, as a way of boosting the tourist market” (63). Part of the defense of tradition, then, exists so that tradition can be sold to tourists. In other words, if a country does not protect its cultural heritage from tampering then it has less to offer to others as local, customary, or exotic. Some elements of a national cultural heritage must be kept in order to attract tourists to an experience of the “exotic” or the “other” at the destination. Souvenirs and other creations that “sell” the country are often considered of less quality than the fashionable and modern work designers aim to create and sell at high prices.

Part of the issue is the clear division existing in the appreciation of urban crafts versus rural crafts. Fashion in Puerto Rico is an urban industry mostly developed in the capital city of San Juan and thus it stands in direct opposition to the world of crafts and tradition of the smaller towns and rural areas. Ramón López (2003, 28) believes that a division between the perception of artisanal crafts and fine arts was settled in Puerto Rico during the earlier part of the twentieth century and as a result of the American push for modernization and industrialization. López (2003) insists that peasant and rural traditions were differentiated based on whether they would appeal to wealthy urban patrons or not. Therefore crafts related to furniture making, hand-made lace, and metal work were considered a higher art when compared to the craft of making straw hats, straw mats, or even wood-carved saints. In general, the American takeover in 1898 prompted a push for the elimination of the old Spanish system of landowners to establish an industrialized capitalist society that could speed up modernization through the use of industrial processes. Crafts—particularly rural ones—were then considered inferior unless they could yield industrial production. This is precisely what makes Puerto Rico an interesting and different case from the rest of Latin America since the island has never been independent and the native and Spanish cultural heritage is crucial in the struggle to resist American colonization and the standardization or globalization of local trades. American colonization insisted on the sacrifice of old and traditional arts for the sake of progress and also to promote the use of American techniques and products in the island.

Puerto Rican fashion designers are more interested in placing themselves within a picture of global (western) fashion and leave behind signs of a disadvantaged past and present (the local, non-western). They do not seem fully invested in the construction of a national fashion narrative as much as they are in seeing Puerto Rican fashion as successfully integrated with the global fashion system. The confidence of modern design seems crucial to success. Displaying taste, affluence, knowledge of global trends, and styles is more important than connecting to national cultural heritage. This also speaks to the nature of Puerto Rico as a country.

Puerto Rico is an island; both isolated and connected to the rest of the world. Puerto Rico is the West; Puerto Rico is not the West. San Juan is a postmodern Latin American city sharing some of the characteristics described by Alan Gilbert (1998) when discussing how Latin American cities look similar with extremes of poverty and affluence and almost identical suburbs, traffic jams, and busy walking centers. This is in stark contrast with small towns and rural areas that are repositories of the cultural past and celebrated national crafts and where the idea of Puerto Rico as the “other” or the rural non-West is more evident. Some of these cities include Moca, the capital of mundillo lace; Hatillo, where the Festival de Máscaras is held; San Sebastián, known for hammock production; and Loíza, where the Festival de Santiago Apóstol takes place.

Modern fashion represents a foreign system, a global system of which Puerto Rican designers wish to be a part. American and European designers appropriate Latin American cultural heritage elements because they see them as exotic; on the other hand, Puerto Rican fashion designers incorporate elements of other nations and cultures perceived as exotic (Asian and African countries in particular). A country does not have to be a colonial or a former colonial power to create an “other” or to see others as exotic. Incorporating local cultural heritage as a source of inspiration for fashion design should allow Puerto Rican designers to put forward collections that understand the complex meaning of cultural heritage better than those created by outside designers. An important challenge is the lack of textile design and a textile production industry in the country to allow for the creation of fabrics that can incorporate cultural heritage. Occasionally designers develop their own textiles, but finding appropriate fabrics does present a challenge and is in part a result of Puerto Rican insularism.

Puerto Rican fashion designers interested in exploring cultural heritage find themselves in between these seemingly contradicting ideologies of partaking in a global fashion system and exploring nationality while protecting cultural heritage. The connection to national heritage may only work if it warrants simultaneously a connection to the global world of fashion. A successful example is the Spring/Summer 2014 collection by Gabriel Ocasio for his brand ProductoLocal where the silhouette and the cut of the pieces are trendy but the iconography is local. Incorporating cultural heritage into their collections while keeping with fashion trends may assist Puerto Rican designers in developing an aesthetic that goes beyond following global fashion and helps developed a truly Puerto Rican fashion style that may then claim a stronger place in global fashion scenarios while still keeping roots in the national. Cultural heritage is cultural capital available to Puerto Rican fashion designers, but they seem to value cultural capital coming from their knowledge of contemporary fashion trends over cultural capital arising from their own background. Discussing the Brazilian fashion industry Brandini (2009) says that “even though the fashion industry manipulates and rearticulates authentic cultural roots, Brazilian fashion can be seen as a totemic manifestation of Brazilian culture. Traditional signs and icons are combined with aspects of modern urban life to represent a cultural universe where individuals, collectivities, and quotidian life together create a new aesthetic that is communicated through clothes” (170). We expect that—as the Puerto Rican fashion design industry strengthens—designers will begin to identify the creative benefits that arise from the layers and complexity derived from a dialect with their cultural heritage and directly or metaphorically incorporating elements of cultural heritage in their designs.

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